



Public Relations and Politics

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Chapter 3: Public relations and politics

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Chapter aims

Any discussion of the role of public relations (PR) within the political sphere naturally falls into two areas, the use of PR practices by government and the use of PR and public affairs by non-governmental actors in the political process. The first part of this chapter will discuss the role of political PR in liberal democratic societies with a particular focus on governmental bodies within the United Kingdom. It will address the scope and scale of government communication built up under the recent New Labour administration which governed the UK from 1997 to 2010. This section will also address the Lobby system of briefing journalists, discuss the role of soundbites and pseudo-events, and some of the tactics employed by spin doctors, before discussing a case study focusing on how New Labour communicated its policies on welfare reform. The importance of good presentation is hardly a radical new idea in politics but the increasing reliance on 'buying in' PR expertise in this vital area has been controversial, to say the least. This section will conclude by addressing Habermas's public sphere ideal, and how it relates to public relations and political communication.

The second half of the chapter examines the specialist area of public affairs and lobbying work. It discusses the importance of intelligence gathering and monitoring the policy making processes as well as exploring how organizations can seek to influence governmental actors, policy development and ultimately legislation through various public affairs strategies. There will also be an examination of how the public policy process may vary under different national political systems, as well as in supra-national contexts like the EU or UN. The second half of the chapter is divided into two sections. The first section briefly discusses definitional issues, theoretical perspectives and the influence of political structures and institutions on public affairs and lobbying work. The second section discusses key issues pertaining to practice beginning with environmental analysis and continuing with a description of the three key public affairs strategies; direct lobbying, grassroots campaigning, and coalition building, before concluding with a brief discussion on evaluating public affairs practice.

1. Government public relations

When Gordon Brown replaced Tony Blair as Prime Minister of the UK on the 27th June 2007, he promised a “different type of politics”, that would be marked by “open and honest dialogue” (*Guardian*, 2007). New Labour had been shaped in its early days by spin, and built upon making the presentation of policy as important, and sometimes more important than policy itself. Indeed, New Labour’s period in government (1997-2010) had been characterised for many by an unparalleled rise in public relations in all socio-economic spheres and particularly in political culture. In government New Labour built a communications structure of unprecedented scope and scale, with large amounts of human and financial resources expended on presenting politicians and policies in a good light.

Spin and indeed the whole PR industry has sustained fierce criticism for playing a role which has been to the detriment of journalism and the democratic process. Journalist Bryan Appleyard complained ‘Hacks still naively pursue something they like to call the truth. Their problem is that it no longer exists. For truth has been destroyed by public relations executives, or “scum” as we like to call them’ (*Guardian*, 2003). This kind of comment is typical of the journalistic distrust of PR which frequently sees it pilloried in the media for its role in contaminating and corrupting the political process in Britain. Spin doctoring, negative campaigning, and the pernicious influence of lobbyists are all highlighted by some commentators as examples of how PR has degraded the political process. There are frequent calls to return to a type of political activity where these somewhat dubious persuasive tactics had no place. This presumption, frequently asserted by the media and politicians, implying a tainting effect of PR on British political culture, should be questioned. Indeed, it could be argued, the media, politicians and PR specialists are increasingly bound together in a relationship that the media and politicians find more beneficial than they care to admit. This does not mean however that this is necessarily always a healthy situation for democratic politics but it is the current reality which this section will describe and assess.

The public relations state?

From its inception, New Labour was a political project built upon a reliance on information management, as it carefully tried to construct an image of a party that had moved on from its internal ideological battles of the 1980s. Indeed, Michie has argued that ‘the success of New Labour, indeed its very creation, is the product of spin-doctoring, practised with relentlessness and virtuosity’ (quoted in McNair, 2000, p. 8). It is thus no surprise that when it

was elected in 1997 New Labour set about reforming the communication structures within government, enhancing what Maloney (2006) has called ‘the most resourced, comprehensive and continuous PR operation in the UK’(p. 121). Under New Labour, the numbers of communications staff employed in Whitehall departments rose from 795 in 1998 to 1,376 in 2008 (*HL Paper 7*, 2009, p. 34). Specifically in terms media relations, the number of press officers in Whitehall departments rose from 216 in 1998 to 373 in 2008 (*HL Paper 7*, 2009, p. 35). During its time in office, New Labour also extensively utilized Special Advisors, who are publicly-funded political advisors to Ministers. Their number fluctuated under New Labour rising from 38 in 1997, to a high point of 84 in 2003, before falling back to 73 in 2007 (*HL Paper 7*, 2009, p. 25). In 2007, 24 of these special advisors were employed within Number 10 (*HL Paper 7*, 2009, p. 54). The cost of government communications is also noteworthy. To give some examples, the cost of running the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) press office was in 2009 £11.5 million. Moreover, the Department of Health (DoH) had a total communications budget of £52.2 million in 2007/2008: ‘This was made up of an administrative budget of £7.1 million covering the cost of the 122 staff and their day-to-day operations, and £45.1 million of programme costs’ (*HL Paper 7*, 2009, p. 55).

Many commentators note how careful management of information turns it into a very valuable resource. Cockerall *et al.* (1984) suggest that what government ‘chooses to tell us through its PR machine is one thing; the information in use by participants in the country’s real government is another’ (p. 9). Negrine (1996) notes the ‘increasing use of carefully crafted communication strategies by governments to ensure that . . . the information they seek to impart to their citizens has an appropriate “spin” on it’ (p. 10). Obviously this increased use of PR specialists by the Government may merely reflect a more general ‘promotional culture’ in Britain (Miller 1998). However some observers have expressed disquiet at the increasing use of information management techniques by the Government. Deacon and Golding (1994) have noted with concern the rise of the ‘public relations state’ (p. 7) and Schlesinger (1990) notes that there are important questions

[A]bout the nature of information management in a society by a variety of groups in conditions of unequal power and therefore unequal access to systems of information production and distribution and these questions are particularly acute in regard to government because ‘the apparatuses of the state . . . enjoy privileged access to the media’ (p. 82).

There are various ways in which governments manage information in order to privilege their own views on an issue. Leaks of important information, or even important documents (Negrine, 1996), are one way in which the Government or powerful interest groups within the

state may attempt to control the media agenda, but perhaps the key weapon in the Government's information management armoury is the 'Lobby' system.

The Lobby

The lobby is the exclusive group of journalists that is briefed twice daily by the Prime Minister's spokesperson (PMS) during sittings of Parliament, so called because journalists historically assembled in the Member's Lobby of the House of Commons. In 2008 it had 176 members, mostly representing the main national news outlets (*HL Paper* 7, 2009, p. 21), and has been described as 'the Prime Minister's most useful tool for the political management of the news' (Cockerall *et al.*, 1984, p. 33). All of the national newspapers and television and radio broadcasters are represented in the Lobby, with some media organisations such as the BBC sending numerous journalists. This system is a very important resource that British governments use - and some would argue abuse - for keeping control of information flows to the media and hence to the general public. It remains the best way for political journalists to get the up-to-date position of the government on a developing news story, as it carries the authority of the Prime Minister. On this, Cockerall *et al.* (2004) note that 'what the Press Secretary says at these briefings is what the Prime Minister wants the press, radio and television to report' (p. 33). Echoing this Franklin also suggests that when a Government Press Secretary gives a briefing there is a strong likelihood that it will appear as a news item, 'replete with the political spin he places on it' (2004, p. 44).

The Lobby system, despite claims to the contrary by those who have utilised it (e.g. Sir Bernard Ingham cited in McNair, 1994, p. 135) is a unique system within Western democracies. This does not mean that other governments do not attempt to manage information - of course they do - but it is normal practice to appoint a party political spokesperson (such as a Minister of Information) who openly represents the government position and is attributable. This is not the case in Britain, the Prime Minister's Press Secretary is actually a member of the Civil Service and thus officially neutral. Following the *Mountfield Review* in late 1997, New Labour enabled the Prime Ministers spokesperson to be identified regarding statements in the Lobby briefing by their job title, but not by name. Prior to this Lobby briefings were off-the-record and non-attributable; they remain exclusive however, with the 'only access the public and non-lobby journalists have to the proceedings [coming] in the form of a brief summary posted on the Number Ten website' (Ramsey, 2010, p. 88). There have been numerous calls for the Lobby to be televised (from government reviews and academic commentators) in an effort to make it more transparent, but they were continually resisted by the New Labour government. Some compromises have been

made however, with more on-camera briefing by ministers and monthly televised Downing Street press conferences taking place, following changes implemented by Alastair Campbell in late 2002 after the initial recommendations of the *Phillis Review*. Whether such changes have actually resulted in a dramatic change in the way information is communicated to the media by government representatives is highly debatable with some commentators suggesting that the systematic practice of favoured journalists being given more revealing off-the-record briefings continuing as usual (Assinder 2002).

Media Management

McNair (2003) notes that in the context of political communication ‘media management comprises activities designed to maintain a positive-media relationship, acknowledging the needs which each has of the other, while exploiting the institutional characteristics of both sets of actors for maximum advantage’ (p. 136). However, at the same time the relationship between politicians and the media can obviously involve a struggle between two different sets of interests and agendas. Moloney (2006) offers two conceptualisations of the government-media relationship one in market terms as an ‘exchange relationship’ and the other in military terms as a ‘contest relationship’. He notes:

The exchange relationship characterises government and media as traders; the contest relationship as opponents. The exchange relationship implies two equally satisfied parties while the contest one implies winners and losers. The role of the media as watchdogs is consistent with the contest model. Public relations people invariably favour the exchange relationship but are prepared and skilled for the contest one (Moloney, 2006, p. 126).

From the perspective of the contest model the journalist attempts to seek out and present the ‘facts’ while the politician will want to ensure that a news story reflects the ‘message’ that they wish to convey. There is nothing particularly new in the attempt by the political elites to try and control media representations, as is revealed in various accounts of the development and growth of political PR from the early years of the 20th century onwards (Pearson, 1992; McNair, 2003; L’Etang, 1998b, 2004). However the present discussion will largely focus on the role of political PR over the past three decades in the UK, and in particular New Labour’s period in office, a period which witnessed an important and rapid transformation in the role and status of PR within political culture. This expansion of PR activity has unsurprisingly been accompanied by an increasing reliance upon media management strategies. Some commentators (Fairclough, 2000; McNair, 2003; Franklin, 2004,) have pointed to the increasing use of the ‘soundbite’ and the ‘pseudo-event’ (Boorstein, 1962), of ‘image management’ and ‘spin’, as key strategies used by politicians to control media representations of them and their policies.

Soundbites and pseudo-events

As the use of spin and information management by government has increased, the impact upon journalism has been perceptible. Cockerell *et al.* (1984) note that, in regard to the political process in the UK, 'Very few journalists have had the incentive to dig deeper, to mine the bedrock of power rather than merely scour its topsoil' (p. 11). It is the broadcast journalists' 'job' to pick out the key details or important points of any political event or speech. If that task is made easier, if the speech contains memorable phrases (soundbites) which summarise the main points, then there is a good chance that these portions of the speech will be selected and broadcast on the few minutes allotted to 'story' on the broadcast news bulletins. Tony Blair's phrase 'tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime' from a speech made when he was Shadow Home Secretary has entered the national consciousness. It is indeed a memorable phrase, but it is important to remember that being 'tough' and talking about being 'tough' was a carefully constructed aspect of the Blair style. Fairclough (2000) argues that 'Blair's "toughness" has been self-consciously built into his communicative style as a matter of policy and strategy' (p. 8). Occasionally, Blair let the façade of the soundbite communication culture slip, when after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland he famously uttered, 'A day like today is not a day for soundbites, really. But I feel the hand of history upon our shoulders' (BBC 2007). The Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government, elected in May 2010, has paid similar attention to the soundbite: David Cameron and his Ministers have constantly repeated that with respect of the financial crises and public spending cuts, 'we are all in this together'. In its first year in office, Ministers in the Coalition have often repeated the mantra that they are 'fixing the financial mess that Labour left us'.

Spin and image management

Defining political spin is very difficult, and some commentators note that there is a danger that the term is now used to describe so many activities that it is in danger of becoming meaningless. Andrews (2006) points to the fact that today practically all of a government's promotional activities seem to be referred to as 'spin'. Gaber (2000a) argues that 'As long as politicians have been politicking, spinners have been spinning' (p. 61). However, there are some definitions that we can forward that make sense of a phenomenon that is ancient, and yet in its current form, quite recent. Street (2001) locates spin within media relations and states that it involves 'getting the right image, making the right connections, and ensuring that both appear on the next day's front page' (p. 1). McNair (2004) argues that spin is a 'convenient and media

friendly shorthand for a particular kind of political public relations, with the negative connotation of spinning a yarn' (p. 328). Spin is probably best understood as a process that became intensified, and better funded and resourced under Bill Clinton's New Democrats and Tony Blair's New Labour in the 1990s. As we have suggested above, spin became more professionalised, and increasingly carried out by professional and dedicated information and communication managers under New Labour. Describing the role of spin in the New Labour project, Ludlam and Smith (2001) argue that it can be understood as a 'new strategic thinking - against which all programmatic or organisational initiatives were judged - and this dominated the struggle for electability' (p. 24).

Gaber (2000b) argues that in trying to understand spin, we can break down it down into two categories: the 'above the line' and the 'below the line' tactics that a spin doctor may employ. The 'above the line' category includes those activities that would be considered routine, and that 'would have caused an "old fashioned" press officer no great difficulty' (Gaber 2000b, p. 508). These activities may be carried out by civil servants working in communication, without breaking any regulations or straying into the 'politicization' of the civil service. They relate to the everyday business of government communication, and as such are often banal, receiving little coverage in the press. These activities might include releasing press releases, holding press conferences, and using Ministerial speeches and answers to Parliamentary questions in the House of Commons to communicate information. Gaber (2000b) also identifies 'Reacting to government/party announcements...publicizing speeches, interviews and articles...reacting to interviews or speeches...reacting to breaking news events' (p. 509) as activities that can all be grouped into this category. The 'Below the line' category includes those activities employed by spin doctors that are not conventional, and at times, ethically questionable. Gaber (2000b) identifies that these activities are 'usually covert and as much about strategy and tactics as about the imparting of information' (p. 508). 'Below the line' activities include 'Staying on message (ensuring a consistent line is taken)...setting and driving the news agenda (ensuring that government receives coverage on its terms)...kite flying (testing out reaction to a policy before a formal announcement)' and 'firebreaking' (2000b, p. 510-512). In the case of 'firebreaking', this involves distracting journalists from a particular story, by planting another of greater significance. Gaber (2000a) notes that an example of this happened in 1997, when the '*News of the World* revealed the Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook, was engaged in an extra-marital affair'(p. 65). Promptly, the New Labour spin machine constructed a smoke screen, by releasing two stories, relating to MI6 investigation of Chris Patten, and the possible reprieve of the Royal Yacht Britannia, that was due for scrapping at the time. All these tactics represent real events that

occurred during New Labour's time in office: the next section addresses one case study regarding how New Labour communicated on the subject of welfare reform.

Government Communication and Public Relations: A case study

Several authors (Jones, 1999; Fairclough, 2000) have discussed the media management surrounding the Government's welfare 'reforms' as a key example which illustrate 'New Labour's management of news and "media spin"' (Fairclough, 2000, p. 129). Early in their tenure, in 1998, Labour opted to launch a 'welfare roadshow' in a bid to attempt to control the news agenda with Prime Minister Tony Blair going 'on the road' to put his case for welfare reform to the people of Britain. Blair's first speech was in Dudley, and the day before this speech his Chief Press Secretary Alastair Campbell gave private briefings to the media in which he emphasised, with a battery of facts and figures, the costs to the nation, of benefit fraud. The next day - the official launch of the welfare roadshow - two national newspapers, *The Times* and the *Mirror*, carried articles 'written' by Tony Blair which were virtually indistinguishable from the briefing Campbell had given the day before. That evening, in Dudley, Blair's speech again reinforced the message, with virtually the same language, that he was determined to do something about benefit fraud. Fairclough (2000) notes that 'The risk of unpredictable and uncontrollable media uptake of the speech is minimised by trailing the speech in a way which presents it in the way the Government wants it to be seen - which puts a particular "spin" on it' (p. 130). This was of course only the beginning of the welfare reform process which proceeded through a 'consultation' (Green Paper) stage and eventually to Welfare Reform Bill published on the 11th February 2011. Fairclough (2000) argues that the whole process, from initial campaign, through the consultative stage, to the presentation of the Bill to Parliament, was 'largely managed through managerial and promotional means rather than democratically through dialogue' (p. 129). 'Part of the art of "spin"', according to Fairclough 'is calculating what additional emphases and foregrounding newspapers . . . will predictably add, which may be an effective way for the Government to convey implicitly messages it may not wish to convey explicitly' (2000, p. 131). In the case of the welfare reform legislation, issues surrounding benefit fraud were only a small part of the Bill, which was largely redistributive, but there was a constant stream of messages about how Tony Blair would 'get tough' on benefit fraud. This allowed politically conservative newspapers like the *Daily Mail* to use headlines like 'Welfare: The Crackdown'. Fairclough (2000) suggests that the *Daily Mail* report 'effects certain transformations which significantly and (from a press officer's perspective) predictably convey a "tougher" message than Blair's' (p.

131), but the key point is that this ‘message’ will reassure the *Daily Mail’s* largely Tory readership.

Political communication, public relations and the public sphere

The case study discussed above, along with Gaber’s analysis of the tactics of spin, raises important questions about the role of PR within the context of political communication in liberal democracies. The increased focus on spin and information management and the manner in which government presents its policies, have all had an impact on how the public perceive the political process. Fairbanks *et al.* (2007) have noted the decline in public trust in government and suggest that this decline ‘is an outgrowth of poor communication between government and its publics, where publics feel that they are not well informed about government actions’ (p. 23). They note that:

A healthy democracy requires an informed public and demands that governments provide information to the public about policies, decisions and actions. Public relations principles and theories such as transparency, models of public relations and stakeholder management provide guidance on how to most effectively communicate this information to the public. (Fairbanks *et al.*, 2007, p. 24)

It is clearly the case that governments and mainstream political parties have the right to present their policies persuasively to the electorate. However governments are elected to serve the people and this means they must approach information dissemination in a more open and transparent way than any other institution. They have a responsibility to be accessible and accountable to those who have elected them and in this sense some would argue they have a responsibility to help develop a fully functioning ‘public sphere’ (Habermas, 1989).

The public sphere ideal

Dahlgren (2001) notes that in its original formulation ‘the public sphere as described by Habermas consists of the institutional space where political will formation takes place, via the unfettered flow of relevant information and ideas’ (p. 33). In Habermas’ analysis the public sphere emerged within the bourgeois classes of late eighteenth century Western Europe, and was aided by the development of mass literacy. The Enlightenment ideals of rational thinking, argument and discussion were, albeit imperfectly, manifested in the clubs, coffee houses, newspapers and pamphlet writing which characterised this era. In his historical analysis Habermas traced the decay of the public sphere as the nineteenth century developed, with the logic of the marketplace coming to dominate the media, resulting in an increasing trivialization of political debate. Habermas calls this process the ‘refeudalization’ of the public sphere (Habermas,

1989). Whether or not we have anything today which could qualify as a functioning public sphere has been widely debated (Dahlgren, 2001; Sparks, 2001) but many commentators would argue that at the very least the concept retains a usefulness as a normative vision. Bennett and Entman (2001) suggest that in the ideal public sphere ‘all citizens have equal access to communication that is both independent of government constraint, and through its deliberative, consensus-building capacity, constrains the agendas and decisions of government in turn’ (p. 2). They note that of course this ideal has never been achieved, and probably never will. Nevertheless the concept ‘serves theorists well as an ideal type – that is, as a construct against which different real-world approximations can be evaluated’ (Bennett and Entman, 2001, p. 3). In respect to the political public sphere Richards (2004) notes that in Habermas’ formulation ‘the public in the liberal democracies should be a participatory public, the collective of citizens engaged, ideally, in informed and rational discussion, and in dialogue with their leaders’ (p. 173). If this is to occur, citizens must be able to depend on information from government communication that is accessible, transparent and participatory. Based on the evidence presented thus far, a great deal of government communication in the UK and in other democratic societies is still a long way from this ideal.

2. Public affairs

Defining public affairs and lobbying

Harris and Moss (2001) have noted that ‘the term “public affairs” remains one that is surrounded by ambiguity and misunderstanding’ (p. 110). Arguably this is much more of an issue in the UK than it is, for example, in the US and this is primarily to do with how public relations and public affairs are conceived of in the two national contexts. The two activities clearly overlap in several key ways although the nature of their relationship tends to be viewed somewhat differently in US literature compared to UK perspectives. A typical US public relations textbook describes public affairs as merely one aspect of public relations work: ‘PR counselling firms use the public affairs label for their lobbying and governmental relations services designed to help clients understand and address regulatory and legislative processes (Broom, 2009, p. 35).

McGrath (2005) argues that it is this conception of public affairs, as a public relations strategic specialism, that is articulated by the majority of practitioners in the US. In the UK however the relationship between public affairs and public relations is viewed rather differently, in fact commentators from the UK frequently resist or downplay the idea that there is any necessary connection at all between the two activities. Moloney notes;

Many professional lobbyists reject their inclusion in PR, joining the flight from it as a work title and preferring euphemisms such as government relations, political communications and public affairs specialists. For these separatists, PR is public campaigning via the media, as opposed to private and confidential approaches to persuade powerful persons face to face. (2000, p. 113)

While some may see merit in articulating a conceptual difference between the two activities, public affairs whether in the UK, the US, or elsewhere, almost always involves much more than just face-to-face 'insider' dealings with those who hold power in public policy arenas. Arguably a considerable amount of public affairs activity is indistinguishable from public relations activity and indeed one of the arguments of this chapter is that shared conceptual understandings and theoretical explanations of both public affairs and public relations can enrich our understanding and analysis of practitioner work.

McGrath (2005) offers a succinct and useful discussion of definitional issues and points out that in many accounts, particularly those written by practitioners, which attempt to define the activity lack clarity at best and, at worst, are rather confusing and contradictory. McGrath cites Milbrath's, straightforward and still relevant, 50 year old definition to describe the essential features of lobbying. Milbrath notes 'lobbying is the stimulation and transmission of a communication, by someone other than a citizen acting on his own behalf, directed to a governmental decision-maker with the hope of influencing his decision' (Milbrath, 1963, p. 8). Clearly as is evident from Milbrath's description defining lobbying is a simpler task than defining public affairs. Lobbying, almost irrespective of where it is practiced, is essentially an advocacy activity directed at government/legislators and carried out by actors within or on behalf of a group or organization. However public affairs should not be narrowly conceived and limited to advocacy efforts to influence government policy through direct contact with political actors by organizational members or representatives. Harris and Moss (2001) point out:

Those adopting a broader perspective see public affairs as managing a broader range of relationships with organizational stakeholders, particularly those which may have public policy implications, in which they may employ a range of marketing communications and public relations tools (p. 110).

It is this broader definition that we adopt because public affairs work almost always involves monitoring and intelligence gathering in the public policy sphere and engagement with the wider public sphere through media relations activities. It may also involve building relationships and coordinating activities with other actors engaged in pursuing the same interest or promoting the same cause. Depending on the organization it may also involve coordinating grassroots activities by members of one's own group and those sympathetic to its agenda.

Pressure groups and interest groups

Who engages in public affairs and lobbying activity? Essentially it is those actors who have an interest in the development of public policy but are not directly engaged in legislating or governing. These actors tend to be described as ‘interest groups’ in the much of the US literature and ‘pressure groups’ in the literature on the UK/EU context. If we examine typical definitions of what constitutes a pressure group it is clear that the ‘pressure’ that groups exert is in respect to attempts to influence political agendas and more specifically the development and implementation of public policy and legislation. Grant (2000) writing on the UK/EU context states that; ‘A pressure group is an organization which seeks as one of its functions to influence the formulation and implementation of public policy, public policy representing a set of authoritative decisions taken by the executive, the legislature, and the judiciary, and by local government and the European Union’ (p. 14). Coxall (2001) in his analysis of pressure group politics makes an important distinction between a ‘cause’ group which ‘is formed to promote a particular cause based on a set of shared attitudes, values or beliefs: examples are Greenpeace, the Child Poverty Action Group and Amnesty International’ and a ‘sectional’ group which ‘represents the self-interest of a particular economic or social group in society: examples are the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), the Trades Union Congress (TUC), and the British Medical Association (BMA)’ (Coxall, 2001, p. 5). Thomas (2004) in the key US work in the area echoes closely the above definition of a pressure group, when he notes that the interest group is ‘an association of individuals or organizations or a public or private institution that, on the basis of one or more shared concerns, attempts to influence public policy in its favour’ (p. 4).

Public affairs theory

Getz (2001) notes that: ‘the dominant theoretical approach to political influence is interest group theory. Interest group theory suggests that the democratic public policy process is an attempt to reach a compromise between the competing goals of a multitude of interest groups’ (Getz, 2001, p. 308). Essentially, as Thomas (2004) notes in a key work on interest group theory, this is an approach underpinned by a pluralist conception. Thomas agrees with Getz that while it is the case that different theoretical approaches make a definitive body of knowledge hard to construct most theoretical approaches utilize some form of ‘pluralism’ (2004, p. 17). Pluralism can be defined as ‘the idea that modern societies contain all sorts of competing groups, interests, ideologies and ideas and in this context democratic politics is seen as a struggle by interests and

ideas to predominate, often by inspiring the formation of political parties or pressure groups' (Budge *et al.*, 1998, p. 323).

Pluralism does in many ways provide a useful theory for understanding the role of public affairs in a liberal democratic societies but there are some important critiques of the pluralist perspective. Hill (2005) notes that:

[O]pposition to the pluralist perspective can take two forms. One is to argue that this is not a satisfactory model for democracy (it is too indirect or it is impossible to realise the 'general will' through such diversity). ...The other is to argue that pluralism provides a misleadingly optimistic picture of the way power is organised in those societies described as pluralist. (p. 28)

The 'pluralist perspective' is challenged by a range of theories which identify ways in which power is 'concentrated in the hands of small groups, often described as elites' (Hill, 2005, p. 50). Hill notes that in much of the literature these perspectives have traditionally been described as 'structural' critiques. The key argument of such critique is that 'there is a range of institutions – the family, the church, the economy, the state – that are linked together in a structure that has a powerfully determining impact on what gets on the [political] agenda' (2005, p. 47). However Hill suggests that when one examines much of this critique:

[I]t is open to question whether the phenomena being explored should be described as 'structural'. What is being described is divisions within societies, which are maintained and reinforced in various ways ...[through]...ideas about society and its culture – discourses if you like – that sustain patterns of power (2005, p.48-49).

Arguably, as we will discuss below, Hill dismisses 'structural' issues rather too hastily. Nevertheless his reference to 'discourses' is interesting and important because although there have been some notable attempts (e.g. Fisher, 2003) to apply a discourse perspective to public policy formation this has largely remained an underdeveloped theoretical lens through which to view the practice of public affairs (Somerville, 2011). This is unfortunate because the discourse perspective has arguably opened up important new insights into PR practice and, we would argue, it can do the same for public affairs.

Motion and Weaver (2005) argue that 'In public relations, discourse is deployed as a political resource to influence public opinion and achieve political, economic and sociocultural transformation' (p. 52). A 'discourse' then is the vehicle by which public relations practitioners and, we would argue public affairs practitioners, attempt to 'establish, maintain, or transform hegemonic power [because] ...public relations discourse strategies are deployed to circulate ideas, establish advantageous relationships, and privilege certain truths and interests' (Motion and Weaver, 2005, p. 52-3). Viewed in this way public affairs practitioners as well as public relations

practitioners should be 'theorised as working to (strategically) privilege particular discourses over others, in an attempt to construct what they hope will be accepted as in the public interest and legitimated as policy' (Weaver, *et al*, 2006, p. 18).

While not engaging directly with discourse theory some recent academic accounts of public affairs do adopt something similar to a discourse analysis approach of the activity. For example McGrath's (2007) advocacy of the tactic of 'framing' which he suggests involves assessing how 'lobbyists use language consciously to frame policy issues in such a way as to position their organization and its policy preferences to greatest effect' (p. 269) echoes the discourse perspective. McGrath notes Entman's (1993) definition that the process of framing is in essence 'to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendations for the item described' (Entman, 1993, cited in McGrath, 2007, p. 271). The parallel here with the notion of promoting a hegemonic discourse is clear. Similarly in Heugens's (2002) analysis of the use of storytelling in public affairs, which obviously involves the construction of a narrative discourse, is an important contribution although the link between this approach and discourse theory is seldom alluded to. Heugens assesses storytelling as an important corporate and activist tool for gaining the support of various external constituencies in the ongoing semiotic wars over biotechnology. By 'storytelling' Heugens clearly means the construction of grand narratives (or discourses) about biotechnology by the key opponents in the battle over GM technologies. He notes that the corporate interests on one side produce a narrative about scientific progress, human advancement, curing starvation etc. Their opponents, the environmentalists, construct a narrative, or discourse, focused on potential health risks, exploitation of third world farmers, corporate greed etc. Heugens notes that 'every corporate story that was ever written and performed to gain the support of consumers and legislators for the commercialisation of modern biotechnology was quickly reciprocated by an antagonist story that defied and contested the claims of these earlier variants' (2002, p. 68).

Structures and Institutions

Motion and Weaver (2005) suggest 'that discourses deployed for public relations purposes can only be fully understood in relation to the political, economic, and social contexts in which they operate' (p. 50). The same is certainly true of public affairs and the context always needs to be taken into account to fully understand why some public affairs efforts are successful and others fail, or to use the language of discourse theory, why some discourses achieve

hegemony and others do not. Thomas makes the point that the ‘types of groups and interests that exist, and the way they attempt to influence public policy are determined by historical, geographical, cultural, social, economic, political, governmental structural and other factors’ and he adds that in turn ‘interest group activities help shape and define the nature of a political system’ (2004, p. 67).

The significance of political structures, institutions, and culture is perhaps thrown into sharpest relief when comparisons between political systems are made. McGrath’s (2005) work on lobbying practices in Washington, London and Brussels demonstrates this through a detailed analysis of the role political culture, institutional frameworks, regulatory environments and executive/legislative relationships all play in determining the differing access points to the policy-making process which need to be engaged to attempt to influence policy decisions in the three political systems. So the UK, with its strong party system, is different to the US with its weak political party control over legislators and in turn both are different from the EU where McGrath notes the key ‘policy-making institutions are supra-national, and composed of members or appointees from a range of political parties’ (2005, p. 185). Thomas (2004) also draws attention to US constitutional arrangements when he points out that ‘largely because of its separation of powers system, its weak political parties, and low level of ideological politics, the United States is an aberrant political system in regard to interest group activity’ (p.1). He does go on to suggest that wider socio-political changes may have the effect of leaving the USA less peculiar in this regard. In particular he notes: ‘The decline of ideology across the Western world, and particularly Western Europe, is making the factor of parties less significant and more akin to the situation in the United States by increasing the strategy and tactic options for many groups’ (Thomas, 2004, p. 76). Thus while it is clear that while the Westminster parliamentary system in the UK means that political parties exert tight control over the legislative process the decline in party membership and voting figures at election time has led some commentators to argue that there has been a shift of power in the policy arena toward interest groups. For example Jordan (2004) notes; ‘Given the scale of interest group numbers and memberships, the “decline of parties” and their replacement by group participation, interest groups are now taken seriously in Britain’ (Jordan, 2004 in Thomas, 2004 p. 302). It is also important, Thomas suggests, to bear in mind that ‘cultural differences have also led some countries to regulate interest group activity extensively, as in the United States, while in others it is much less stringently regulated, as in Britain and Germany’ (2004, p. 72). For a useful account of regulatory environments in the US, UK and EU the reader is directed to McGrath’s study (2005, pp. 167-180).

The various factors discussed above; how one defines public affairs, how its relationship with PR is envisaged and understood, recent scholarly theoretical and conceptual understandings of public affairs, and how structural, institutional and cultural factors all impact on practice have been subject to much scholarly debate. It is to public affairs practice that we now turn, in the final section of this chapter, to discuss some of the key strategies adopted by groups seeking to influence the public policy arena in contemporary democratic societies.

Public affairs practice: Environmental analysis and strategic decision making

Broom (2009) makes the key point that ‘lobbyists spend substantially more time collecting information from government than they do communicating to it, since sound lobbying strategies, tactics, and positions are highly dependent on a strong base of information’ (2009, p. 34). In regard to the analytical methods and techniques used by public affairs practitioners, Fleisher acknowledges that the ‘majority of techniques have been borrowed from related fields like administration, management, marketing, political science, public policy and public relations’ (2002, p. 168). The use of typical business and management analytical tools such as the SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis in public affairs has been noted by Shaw (2005). Fleisher (2002) suggests however, that much of what does occur is however not based on a coherent or rigorous methodology which he argues is a weakness that needs to be addressed more seriously by current practitioners. It is clear that the identification, monitoring and analysis of legislators, officials, political opponents and other relevant stakeholders is very important in public affairs work, but of course, analyzing the political and socio-economic environment is only useful if it enables the development of relevant decision making in respect to the most appropriate strategy and tactics to use in any operating environment.

Although writing in the context of corporate public affairs Getz (2001) raises important questions which are relevant for most organizations seeking to influence public policy. She points out;

A clearly important question has to do with the strategies and tactics that might be employed once the decision to participate has been made. Should a firm develop an ongoing relationship with public officials or should it enter and exit the political arena as issues change? Should political decision makers be approached directly or indirectly? Should the approach be intended to inform, to persuade, or both? Which tactics are effective in which situations, and how does one know? (Getz, 2001, p. 307)

Despite a whole raft of public affairs techniques being identified in the literature (e.g. Showlater and Fleisher, 2005) arguably however they boil down to a choice between several key strategies or combinations of these strategies (Thomas, 2004; McGrath, 2005; Showlater and

Fleisher, 2005). These strategies are: direct face-to-face lobbying; indirect lobbying using grassroots pressure; and the formation of coalitions or alliances with like minded groups to exert broad based pressure.

It should also be noted that decision making in respect to which strategy to adopt may be influenced by socio-economic and ideological constraints. For example a key choice facing some activist groups is whether to engage at all in direct lobbying to try to influence policy or whether to eschew this in favour of protest and pressure from the outside. For example, some of the more ideologically driven environmentalist and animal rights groups have major concerns about compromising their core values by engaging with the governments (and other organisations) which perpetuate systems which they are fundamentally opposed to. It is important to bear in mind that some groups may decide to deliberately reject some of the avenues or strategies open to them and choose to remain outside some parts of the public policy arena. Grant (2000) offers a useful definition of insider and outsider groups: ‘An *insider* group is regarded as legitimate by government and consulted on a regular basis...‘An *outsider* group does not wish to become involved in a consultative relationship with public policy-makers or is unable to gain recognition’ (Grant, 2000, p. 16). Typically outsider groups will adopt non-direct lobbying strategies to exert political pressure, such as grassroots lobbying and direct action.

Public affairs practice: Direct lobbying

Most groups do, however, recognise the importance of putting their case directly to political parties and those holding political office. Fleisher’s (2003) advice to public affairs managers is ‘Be prepared to learn as much as you can about the official before meeting them; do not be concerned if the lawmaker is unavailable and a staff assistant is in their place’ (p. 373). In respect to direct lobbying efforts a knowledge and expertise of how to engage in and implement traditional face-to-face lobbying still determines the success or failure of many public affairs efforts particularly in the UK? McGrath’s (2007) point about lobbyists using ‘language consciously to frame policy issues in such a way as to position their organization and its policy preferences to greatest effect’ (p. 269) is of key importance in any direct lobbying activity.

The view that direct lobbying is essentially persuasive communication where you tailor your message and frame it in an appropriate and appealing way is echoed by many commentators. Mack (1997) suggests that ‘Issues should be framed to show how the public benefits from your side of the argument. Don’t go public with a narrow, self-serving issue’ (cited in McGrath, 2007, p. 271). Arguably political discourse in liberal democratic societies is ultimately underpinned by utilitarian ideals so it is clear that the ‘story’ or ‘narrative’ you present must demonstrate how the

policy which your organization supports is in some way benefitting the common good. This is, of course, where an understanding of the role and power of discourse becomes significant for the public affairs specialists. Being able to demonstrate that your position on an issue is part of a generally accepted discourse which is seen as core to liberal democratic society, for example, human rights, women's rights, freedom, equality, etc., will always be to your advantage. A clear, coherent narrative works best, as McGrath (2007) notes, 'public policy issues (the focus of lobbying efforts) tend to be complex, involving an array of both factors and alternatives; framing is an attempt by lobbyists to set the boundaries of debate on a given issue.' (p. 271).

Of course to actually present your case access for the lobbyist to government actors or key political figures is a key issue. Several recent studies have revealed the growing importance of party conferences as key forum for meeting and engaging in face to face lobbying efforts with key political actors (Thomas, 2005; Harris and Harris, 2005). In a UK study Harris and Harris (2005) drew attention to the growth of lobbying activities at political party conferences through the 1990's in the UK. They note: 'The party conference environment acts as a communications conduit for the sharing and swapping of information as well as an opinion exchange and policy positioning forum... It is perhaps the ultimate network opportunity for those interested in government, political processes, and the formation of policy' (Harris and Harris, 2005, p. 224).

Public affairs practice: Grassroots campaigning

As noted above organizations may be excluded, may choose to exclude themselves, from direct 'insider' contact or they might decide other strategies are also required. In these circumstances indirect lobbying using grassroots pressures is likely to be a useful strategy choice. Fleisher (2003) suggests that; 'Very few issues, particularly those captured in the public's attention by the media, escape the onslaught of organised grassroots techniques coming from all sides of the matter' (p. 371).

Titley (2003) and McGrath (2005) note the increasing importance of 'outsider' tactics, especially grassroots campaigns, which are increasingly supplementing and to some extent perhaps even supplanting 'insider' contact in respect to British and European public affairs. It is clearly a route that is increasingly seen as a useful and legitimate strategy by all interest groups. To some degree then the adoption of what were traditionally thought of as US practices in respect to grassroots lobbying are appearing the UK/EU context although it is probably fair to say that at the present time - for the reasons to do with political culture noted above - in the US many interest groups use grassroots lobbying much more effectively as a political weapon during key legislative debates. Morris (1999) reflecting on the NRA's tactics notes:

[T]he NRA has become incredibly skilled at using its members as a political tool, unlike many special-interest groups, the NRA doesn't even aspire to popularity. When it seeks to influence an election, it doesn't advertise on television or radio. Instead, the NRA sends mailings to its members to urge them to vote for their favoured candidates in elections. The NRA emphasizes its capacity to turn out a disciplined bloc of voters for or against any candidate to strike terror into the hearts of wavering congressmen and senators when gun control legislation come up for a vote. (p. 132)

It has been argued that web activism can be used to underpin and compliment the strategies of grassroots mobilisation and campaigning and thereby transform existing power imbalances that lobbying by powerful groups produces (Kakabadse, *et al*, 2003). More generally there is an accepted wisdom that the Internet help resource poor groups compete with resource rich groups in the policy arena, in fact there is evidence to suggest that the Internet may actually be reinforcing the status quo. Rethemeyer's (2007) research indicates: 'The Internet appears to foster and intensify closed, corporatized policy networks. The solution may not be IT, as the Internet optimists suggest. Rather, it may be to embrace and reform politics-by-organization. The Internet and other forms of IT have a role – though a small one – in this process' (p. 199).

Nonetheless more generally the power and influence of the grassroots has not gone unnoticed and some organizations in recent years have engaged in the practice of manufacturing a grassroots campaign to try to influence policy makers. Although the creation of "front" groups is not a new old practice, the expansion of the Internet has led to a significant amount of debate on created to deceive or mislead policy makers about public opinion (Showlater and Fleisher, 2005). Known as 'astroturf lobbying' such front organizations are designed to give the appearance of widespread citizen support, when in reality they often are created to promote narrow interests.

Public affairs practice: Coalition building

Building a public affairs strategy around grassroots campaigning is sometimes accompanied by the strategy of coalition and alliance building with other interest groups. Fleisher (2003) has noted; 'Through well-conceived coalitions with other allied interests, various groups have been able to achieve important public policy successes' (p. 373). Showalter and Fleisher (2005) suggest: 'The best coalitions have the involvement and commitment of all stakeholders, clear leadership, group agreement on the vision and mission for the coalition, and assessment of member needs and member resources...Once these initial building blocks are established, the effective coalition creates short- and long- term objectives, develops an action plan and implements it (p. 119)'. Generally coalitions which share a similar ideological position, economic

interest or which belong to the same sector socio-economically probably have the greatest chance of long-term success.

However, while alliances between ideologically compatible interest groups are more common it is possible for organisations that at first sight do not seem an obvious fit to work together for mutual benefit. McGrath (2005) notes the example of the alliance a large Japanese manufacturer of audio equipment and tapes forged with the Royal National Institute for the Blind, and educational organisations, to campaign against an increased levy on audio tapes. McGrath cites the views of a senior London lobbyist who helped develop the coalition on behalf of the manufacturer. The lobbyist stated:

Getting the Royal National Institute for the Blind on board was decisive, and yet it was not difficult because this was a genuinely important issue for them: the government was proposing to do something which would substantially increase costs for their members. The RNIB said “Yes, we absolutely were planning to campaign against this anyway, but we lack resources.” So we told them, “That’s fine. We have resources and you have a powerful argument. Let’s put those together.” We decided that what the government was proposing was not a “levy”, it was a “tax”, and we launched a campaign against this tax. Essentially it was funded by manufacturers, but most of the action was provided by other parts of the coalition, in particular the blind. That is why in the end the campaign succeeded, because the blind are a very powerful pressure group and they are not afraid to use their emotional pulling power. (McGrath, 2005, p. 131)

There are several interesting elements to this example. The actors in this coalition not only changed the ‘frame’ of the debate – a ‘levy’ was rearticulated as a ‘tax’ – but even more significantly the discourse of equality/discrimination was brought to the fore and exploited effectively by the partners in the coalition. Coalitions and alliances are frequently fraught with difficulties but groups can work together, even those with radically different worldviews if they can agree on what each can bring to the alliance and what the strengths of each partner are (Showalter and Fleisher, 2005).

Public affairs practice: Evaluation

There have been various attempts to derive evaluation and measurement criteria for public affairs work but according to Fleisher (2005): ‘Unfortunately, the state of performance assessment in public affairs does not actually look all that much better than it did over a decade ago’ (p. 158). One key trend in literature on public affairs evaluation which Fleisher identifies is the tendency toward quantitative measurement in recent years although as he rightly points out providing numeric data seems to be being confused with evaluation in much of this work. He notes:

[T]his has led to their [public affairs specialists] counting most public affairs activities – in terms of things like the number of meetings with key stakeholders, the number of letters sent to key public policy committee personnel, the number of issues being actively monitored, wins and losses, the number of bills being tracked, the number of persons involved in the grassroots programs, etc. (Fleisher, 2005, p. 153)

He points out this is misleading ‘Counting is not equivalent to and is only the starting point of measurement’ (Fleisher, 2005, p. 153). Fleisher in a number of publications (2002, 2003, 2005) has examined the difficulties in measuring or demonstrating the value of public affairs activity from a functionalist, quantitative perspective. Writing specifically on grassroots campaigns he notes:

[P]ublic affairs does not have a body of procedures established that allows appropriate accounting of the net effect on the investments and uses of public affairs resources as other functions have been accustomed to. In general, public affairs practice and performance have always been more of an art than a science, more qualitative than quantitative, and more conjectural than empirical’ (Fleisher, 2005, p. 145).

It should be noted that Fleisher, who has published more than anyone else on this topic over the past decade, is largely correct to assert that the effective evaluation of specific strategies and tactics is a problematic area for the public affairs practitioner. Ultimately the key assessment which matters in respect to public affairs efforts is if there has been an impact on the public policy process and ultimately perhaps legislation which impacts positively on the organization or the cause which it promotes. Thus arguably a straightforward way of evaluating any public affairs activity is to examine the legislation adopted in response to the public affairs efforts surrounding an issue. However policy shifts or policy battles may occur over a very long period of time and this should be taken into account by the public affairs practitioner when contemplating evaluation and measurement issues. ‘Success’ in the policy sphere may not mean the achievement, at least in the short term, of legislative change at all instead it may be measured in the gradual transformation of what McGrath (2007) refers to as the ‘language frame’ or the narrative or discourse used to describe the issue. Changing the discourse will in many cases result in a change in policy change, and legislative change, will in many cases follow. Thus if they wish to evaluate public affairs efforts effectively public affairs managers and practitioners in all sectors would do well to follow the advice of key commentators in the area (Mack, 1997; McGrath, 2007) and become much more sensitive to the language and narratives used to describe issues.

Conclusion

Arguably the key issue in respect to the role of PR in government communication practices is whether or not it can actually assist in developing a more accessible, transparent and participatory public sphere. Hiebert (2005) argues that due to economic and political pressures the mass media can no longer be relied upon to fulfil this role, he suggests 'the only possible solution is PR, not in terms of spin or propaganda but in terms of developing real public relationships in the public sphere' (p. 3). Fairbanks et al (2007) make the point that all organisations, including governments, must be proactive in reaching out to their publics: 'In addition to the open sharing of information, transparency requires organisations to understand and be responsive to the publics they serve' (p. 26). However some have warned of the dangers of fake government 'dialogic' relationships, engaged in merely in order to legitimize the discourse which it wishes to promote. Motion (2005) argues 'Participative public relations, in which stakeholders are discursively engaged with pre-determined solutions and conflict suppressed or ignored, may, in fact, simply be a means of masking power relations rather than genuine engagement' (p. 511). Such will strategies ultimately encourage cynicism and distrust of government and disillusionment with democratic institutions. PR practitioners working for government may struggle with conflicts of interest. They will obviously have the interests of their organisation and perhaps their immediate political boss as a key influence on their conduct but, like the elected politicians they serve, they ultimately have a duty to put the public interest first.

Government policy and legislation impacts on citizens, organisations and institutions throughout society making influencing policy and legislation which benefits one's 'interest' highly desirable and this is the primary task of public affairs. The political landscape in many democratic societies is changing with mainstream political parties declining in membership numbers while the appetite for joining pressure groups, single interest and voluntary groups is on the rise. Perhaps this reflects a decline more generally in traditional societal institutions or maybe a more consumerist approach to politics (Grant, 2000). Whatever the reason the financial and human capital invested in public affairs activity is growing in all sectors; business, public institutions, activist and voluntary/charitable. A range of strategies are employed by the diverse interests and causes which make up the public policy sphere. From face-to-face lobbying to direct action, from grassroots campaigning to coalitions between the most unlikely bedfellows, groups fight to make their voice heard and influence government policy and legislation. Victory in public affairs battles are not necessarily always won by those who have the most resources or have the big battalions. Lest we think the politics of pressure is a new phenomenon it should be

remembered that it took the anti-slavery movement over 40 years of campaigning to change British legislation on slavery in what was at that time the greatest superpower in the world. The Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade was formed in 1787 but it wasn't until 1833 that they succeeded in outlawing slavery throughout the British Empire with the passing of the Slavery Abolition Act. The reasons for the rise of abolitionism is of course complex but the campaigners for legislative change importantly shifted the debate away from an economic discourse (a battleground on which they were bound to lose), to a human rights discourse. They thus demonstrated that in societies where public opinion matters, and can be expressed in democratic forums, those who can convince their fellow citizens that their story, or discourse, is true, or ethical, or rational, can in the end change the laws by which we all must abide.

Further Reading

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Questions for Discussion

1. What are the key media management strategies used by governments in democratic societies?
2. All political parties and all governments spin. And there is nothing wrong with it' (Finkelstein, 2003). Do you agree with Finkelstein's assessment?
3. Do you agree with Fairclough (2000) that democratic dialogue is being replaced with a 'managerial and promotional' approach to the political process in the UK?
4. How useful is the concept of the 'public sphere' in the context of government communication and PR?
5. Examine a media campaign surrounding a current policy initiative by the British Government. In what ways have politicians and their media advisors attempted to 'manage' the British media to achieve the maximum favourable coverage of their policy?
6. Does lobbying of political elites subvert the democratic process?
7. Why should public affairs practitioners pay attention to 'language frames', 'narratives' or 'discourses' in the policy sphere?
8. Should lobbyists in the UK be more tightly controlled? Would you favour statutory regulation similar to that which exists in the US for the UK lobbying industry?
9. In response to the fuel price campaign of 2000 Tony Blair said 'No government, indeed no country can retain credibility in its democratic process or its economic policy-making were it to give in to such protests. Real damage is being done to real people.' Is pressure group grass-roots campaigning a legitimate public affairs activity?
10. Examine a current public affairs campaign in relation to a key policy issue. Which strategies are utilised by those advocating the policy, or policy change and how do they frame the language or discourse in public policy debates?